

# Three speakers, four dialects: documenting variation in an endangered Amazonian language

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# Language documentation and variation

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Yes!

- Speech community deserves a record of their language that represents internal diversity
- Sociolinguistics needs more data about variation in non-Western, non-industrial societies
- Understanding variation enriches other aspects of description & documentation

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- Literature on best practices, field manuals, etc. say little about how to look for and describe variation
- Particular obstacles to documenting variation in endangered and minority languages
  - Variation is not in linguist's expected places in community
  - Variation is not in linguist's expected places in grammar
  - Language ideologies conceal variation from linguist

# Goals of this talk

Share strategies I found successful for:

- 1 Identifying the social parameters of variation
- 2 Capturing variation concealed by style-shifting
- 3 Identifying sociolinguistic variables outside the phonetics & phonology

in a field situation with extensive inter-speaker variation and dialect mixing

# Fieldwork setting

- Focal variety: Northern dialect of Máíhĩki (Western Tukanoan)
- Time: January-June 2014 at former mission town San Antonio del Estrecho, R. Putumayo, Loreto, Peru
- Goals: record and annotate texts, grammatical sketch of "Northern dialect" for polylectal description



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## Endangerment:

- Máihĩki very endangered: ~80 speakers, youngest in 40's
- Speakers identify three dialects
  - Western: associated with R. Yanayacu (Napo basin)
  - Eastern: R. Sucusari (Napo basin), Rs. Ampiyacu & Apayacu
  - Northern: R. Algodón (Putumayo basin)

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  - Northern: R. Algodón (Putumayo basin)
- Northern dialect most endangered: ~12 speakers, youngest 52

# Máihuna traditional settlement area by dialect



(Perú, Ministerio de Transporte y Comunicaciones)

# Northern Máihiki variation

Speaker	descend	cook.VT	3SG.M. PAST	go.1SG. PAST
Soraida	gáè-	kòkò-	-ai	sáhì
Pedro	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáíbì
Federico	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáíbì
Trujillo	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-gi	sáhì
Adriano	gáè-	kòkò-	-gi	sáhì
Otilia	gáè-	kòkò-	-ai	sààbì
W dialect	gáhè-	kwàkò-	-gi	sáhì

(wordlists, texts combined)

# What are the parameters?

Speaker	Birth Yr	Gen	Clan	descend	cook.VT	3SG.M. PAST	go.1SG. PAST
Soraida	c1945	F	óyò	gáè-	kòkò-	-ai	sáhì
Pedro	c1950	M	óyò	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáíbì
Féderico	c1955	M	óyò	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáíbì
Trujillo	c1930	M	íyè	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-gi	sáhì
Adriano	c1945	M	íyè	gáè-	kòkò-	-gi	sáhì
Otilia	1962	F	óyò	gáè-	kòkò-	-ai	sààbì
W dialect				gáhè-	kwàkò-	-gi	sáhì

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- Need to go more fine-grained
  - When and how did the speakers acquire their current variant(s)?
  - What are their life histories like?

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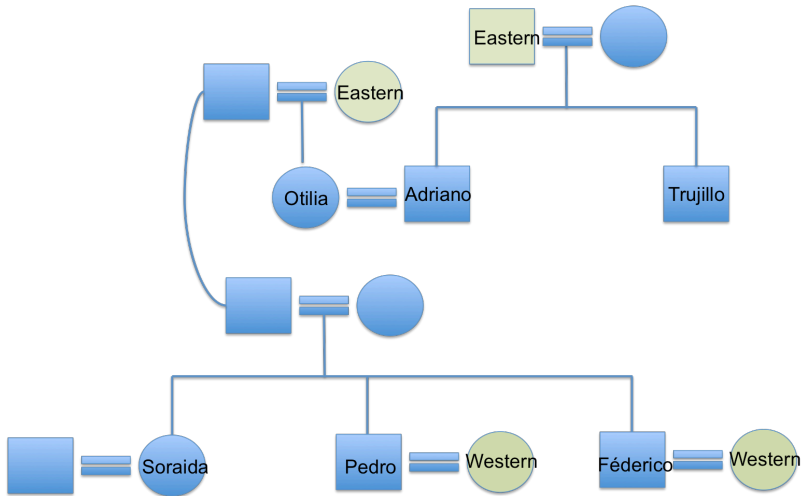
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- Need to go more fine-grained
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  - What are their life histories like?
    - In very-small-scale society, possible that individual relationships will have much greater degree of influence on variant selection

# What are the parameters?

Kinship relations:

- Soraida, Pedro, and Féderico are siblings; Otilia is their parallel cousin and classificatory sister
- Trujillo and Adriano are siblings
- Pedro and Féderico are married to women from Western Máihiki dialect region
- Adriano and Otilia are married to each other
- Soraida was married to a man from Northern dialect region

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## Residence in early life:

- Soraida, Pedro, and Federico born in group living in semi-sedentary style on upper Algodón
- Otilia's father from upper Algodón group; mother from Eastern region
- Trujillo and Adriano's father from Eastern region; mother from upper Algodón; born in downriver settlement on Algodón

# Order in dialect-mixing chaos

Speaker	Spouse Var	Natal Group	descend	cook.VT	3SG.M. PAST	go.1SG. PAST
Soraida	N	Upriver	gáè-	kòkò-	-ai	sáhì
Pedro	W	Upriver	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáfì
Féderico	W	Upriver	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-ai	sáfì
Trujillo	n/a	Downriver	gáè-, gáhè-	kòkò-, kwàkò-	-gi	sáhì
Adriano	N	Downriver	gáè-	kòkò-	-gi	sáhì
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Féderico	W	Upriver	gáè- gáhè-	kòkò- kwàkò-	-ai	sáfì
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We know too little about the parameters of variation in non-industrial societies to make any assumptions about where in the community we will find variation.

- Classic parameters may be irrelevant or uninformative
- Culturally-specific social categories -- clan, estate -- also not necessarily informative
- Not unique to dialect mixing situations, and same circumstances that cause endangerment often also lead to dialect mixing (e.g. Australian Kriol formation, Harris 1993; Clarke 2009)

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- If I had worked only with the individuals initially pointed out to me as "good" potential consultants (Soraida, Adriano)
  - When you ask for "good speakers," what does the community hear?
  - When someone tells you they are not a "good speaker," what do you hear?

# Style-shifting: Northern & Western Máihiki

Wordlist elicitation only:

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Western-influenced speakers give Western variants, *gáhè-* and *kwàkò-*, in wordlist -- but more Northern variants in connected speech

# What influences the style-shifting?

## Probably long-term accommodation

- Speakers with /h/ and /kwa/ all have or had intimates (parent, spouse) from /h/-ful, /kwa/-ful regions
- Speakers without /h/ and /kwa/ have only intimates from N dialect region
- Use of /h/ and /kwa/ is due to accommodation, over many decades, to spouse with these features (Pedro, Féderico) or acquisition from parent with these features (Trujillo)

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Same problems as classic variationist sociolinguistics:

- Style-shifting can involve dialect switching & mixing
- Need to record a range of styles to capture variation

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Further possible problems for recording "casual" speech in documentation:

- Endangerment: speaker rustiness, heightened metalinguistic awareness
- Linguist not native speaker of target language
- Some interview techniques not culturally appropriate



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All of these strategies became easier as my language skills improved -- but still feasible even with limited production ability

# Nature of variables: Northern Máihĩki

Some phonological variables -- (VhV), (kwa) -- but many more in morphosyntax:

- Past-tense inflection for regular class verbs:  
3SG.M *-aĩ* vs. *-gĩ*
- 1SG past inflection for root allomorphy class verbs:  
*sáhì* vs. *sáhẽ* vs. *sáíbì* vs. *sáàbì*
- Copula with 1SG, 2SG subject:  
MASC,FEM *-hã* vs. MASC *-aĩ*, FEM *-ao*
- Others still...

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- Transcribed significant volume of connected speech from multiple consultants (at least in beginning)
- Listened carefully in transcription -- speaker A may "hallucinate" that B is using A's variants

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- Parameters of variation are not uniform across speech communities
- Some parameters may not be obvious (or even visible) to outsiders
- Language and dialect ideologies can conceal variation in multiple ways
- Variation exists beyond phonetics, phonology, and lexicon

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Tools that were useful in this process: wide sampling, deep sampling, close transcription, genealogy & ethnohistory.

# The rewards

Documenting the variation had a considerable return on investment for us

- Improved internal reconstruction
- Better grasp on social dynamics of this speech community & its relation to others
- Large corpus of texts from wide group of speakers
- Better relationship between project and speech community

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  - Metalinguistic talk might focus on phonological and lexical variation...



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  - Metalinguistic talk might focus on phonological and lexical variation...
  - But speakers may nevertheless notice when your materials don't reflect their morphosyntax

# Thanks

Endless thanks to all of my Máihiki teachers, especially Federico, Soraida, and Pedro López Algoba; Otilia López Gordillo; Trujillo Ríos Díaz; and Adriano Ríos Sanchez.



L to R: Adriano Ríos Sanchez, Soraida López Algoba, me, Otilia López Gordillo

# Thanks

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- Parker Huang Undergraduate Travel Fellowship, Yale University (2013-2014)
- NSF Graduate Research Fellowship to the author

# Nature of variables: Northern Máihîki

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- Imperative:  
presence vs. absence of imperative *-hĩ*
- Subject control clause subordinator:  
*-dziki* vs. *-tfiki* vs. *-dzi* + quotative verb
- Future relative clause marker:  
*-haki* vs. *-hagi*
- Subordinator on chained clause with plural subject:  
*-hĩ* vs. floating L